

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – August 2, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 7:15 & 8:30am Sunday Masses – 950 words

Our readings speak in varied ways about God’s providence – and this is a theme that I know I have been preaching more frequently about over these last several months. As certain sectors of our society seemingly spiral out of control, and as our own lives in many ways have become so difficult to live out under the duress of our current problems, there can be a strong temptation at times to believe that God has left us to ourselves; that he is not wielding any authority or governance over us any longer; that, in effect, any providence of his is no longer in our favor. But I said such thoughts are temptations. And indeed, they are lies.

The section of the Catechism on divine providence is brief but quite rich, very much worth reading (paragraphs 302-314).<sup>1</sup> There it speaks about God’s sovereignty, how the universe he created is in a state of journeying towards its ultimate perfection, and how the Lord is able to bring good even out of evil – the greatest example of that being the passion and death of his own Son, which was most certainly the greatest evil ever committed by men and which at the same time brought about an unspeakably greater good: the possibility of salvation for all. It also tells of our role as secondary causes or instruments of providence – how the Lord works in and through us.

Then, in one of the paragraphs, it gives some quotations on providence from the saints, and one of them really struck me. St. Catherine of Siena is quoted as speaking to “those who are scandalized and rebel against what happens to them”. Have we ever been in their number? To them, she says: “Everything comes from love, all is ordained for the salvation of man; God does nothing without this goal in mind”.<sup>2</sup> Imagine if the disciples had rebelled against the Lord in the gospel: “no, there is not enough food here, period; there is no way we can feed all these people!” Fortunately, they did not push back that hard; and Christ, meanwhile, worked a great miracle.

He had been moved with pity for the large crowd that had gathered: he willed their good. Moreover, he intended to provide for it. And we see how he could and did, even to the point of excess. But what if, in the mysterious designs of God, Christ the Lord had chosen not to perform that miracle of feeding? Some may have indeed gone home hungry. Maybe some would have fainted on the way. And how many might have pushed back, complaining: “Some great prophet he was; he brought us out to this wilderness only to starve!” If that sounds familiar, it was how the people of Israel griped against God on several occasions in the Old Testament.

“Everything comes from love,” St. Catherine says; “all is ordained for the salvation of man; God does nothing without this goal in mind.” This universe is in a state of journeying. The Lord holds the plans and knows how to bring them about – but the fulfillment is not realized until the end. This dissatisfies us, and we might say things like, “yes, but St. Catherine was a saint”, supposing that things were thus easier for her. But were they really? Study the lives of the saints. See how they experienced the cross. And see how they ultimately embraced it with trust. Her life was not easy, yet she came to trust that all indeed comes from the love of God.

Throughout the gospels, the Lord Jesus invites us to trust and models that for us. “Consider the birds of the air”,<sup>3</sup> he says, telling how God provides for their every need. “You are worth more than many sparrows”,<sup>4</sup> he says elsewhere. “Do not worry”,<sup>5</sup> “be not afraid”.<sup>6</sup> And, “Not my will,

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<sup>1</sup> To read online, go to [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p4.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p4.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 313. See St. Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue on Providence*, ch. 4, no. CXXXVIII.

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 6:26 and following.

<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 10:26-31.

<sup>5</sup> See Mathew 6:33-34.

<sup>6</sup> Occurs in many places throughout the gospels, and indeed, throughout the entire Bible.

but thine be done”.<sup>7</sup> With these and many other teachings Christ tries to convince us to trust. He also offers us the grace to do so. But does that grace find the right dispositions in us? We have to want it – and we therefore have to resist the temptations that militate against it. Gripping and complaining against God and others is just so easy. We must fight.

Yes, the gospel mentioned the death of St. John the Baptist and brings to mind another place where Christ said, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent bear it away”.<sup>8</sup> Many of the saints understood this violence not to be a fight with human armies, but a reference to the spiritual battle, the fight for our souls – to the struggle to resist discouragement and the devil’s other ruses, to be thankful and practice gratitude in concrete ways, to say “not my will but thine be done” to God, and really to believe and live out St. Paul’s teaching that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

The present craziness was foreseen by our sovereign Lord and included in his plan and providence. He is working through it for good; indeed, for a greater good than we would have had without it. And while we continue in the state of journeying toward that fulfillment – which we know is ultimately the blessed life of heaven – he will always provide for our needs in the ways he judges best for our salvation. It will often not be how we want. If we hold on to our own plans, we will be bitterly disappointed. We must fight temptation. We have to fight to trust. He offers us the grace and daily opportunities. May we learn to trust in his loving providence.

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<sup>7</sup> See Luke 22:42.

<sup>8</sup> See Matthew 11:12.